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Conceptualising Economies and Their Geographies: Spaces, Flows and Circuits

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1 Introduction

The last decade or so has been one of on-going, at times heated, debate in economic geography as to how best to conceptualise and theorise economies and their geographies, and, relatedly, how best to practice and carry out research on such economic geographies. This debate is reflected in a number of edited volumes that seek to define the current state-of-the-art and (re)define the conceptual boundaries of economic geography (for example, see Amin and Thrift, 2004; Clark *et al*, 2000; Lee and Wills, 1997; Sheppard and Barnes, 2000). During the 1970s and 1980s, in the wake of the critique of spatial science and views of the space-economy that drew heavily on the orthodoxies of neoclassical economics, strands of heterodox political-economy approaches in general and Marxian political economy in particular rose to prominence. These were important in introducing concerns with issues of evolution, institutions and the state, alongside those of agency and structure, in seeking to develop more powerful and nuanced understandings of economies and their geographies. Much of the subsequent debate in the 1990s has been informed by post-structural critiques of the such political-economy approaches, especially those that were seen (rightly or wrongly) to rely upon an overly-deterministic and structural reading of the economy and its geographies (Hudson, 2001). These have been important in seeking to re-think relationships between categories such as consumption and production and to provoke more serious consideration of issues such as the relations between agency, practice and structure, the materiality of the economy and the relations between people, nature and things, and of the discursive construction and representation of “the economy”.

But perhaps the focal point of these critiques and debates revolves around the issues of culture and the economy, and the relationships between them, both ontologically and epistemologically¹. There is an as yet unresolved – and maybe irresolvable – debate as to the character of the relationships between culture and economy, with important differences within as well as between the advocates of culture/cultural economy and those of economy/political economy. Recognising this, and so at the risk of some oversimplification, I want to suggest that the recent debates in economic geography can be represented in terms of a dialogue between the proponents of political-economy and those of cultural-economy (which I will elaborate below). However, rather than seeing these as competitive alternatives (which I think it is fair to say has been largely the case to date, and I will return briefly to the implications of this in the final section of the paper), I want to argue that they are most appropriately seen as complementary perspectives from which we

¹ As one of the referees of the paper rightly pointed out, however, there are strands of the economic geography literature that pre-figure this more general concern with relationships between the cultural and the economic (for example, from Buchanan (1935) to Harvey (1973, 195-284) to Lee (1989)). I can only plead guilty to the charge of “historical shortsightedness” that (s)he levels at me. In my (partial) defence, I would argue that I am not alone in this regard as economic geographers have generally sought inspiration in links with other social science disciplines rather than in the history of thought in their own sub-discipline (though see Barnes, 2001) but will be happy on a future occasion to seek to correct this shortcoming.

can seek to understand more fully and in more subtle and nuanced ways economies and their geographies

My primary focus in this paper, then, is with exploring the possibilities for developing more subtle and nuanced conceptualisations of economies and their geographies rather than with the practice of empirical research in economic geography, although I will make a few remarks on the latter subject² and clearly the two are co-dependent. I therefore begin with two introductory questions and sets of issues. First, how do we best conceptualise the production of social life in general, in terms of relations between structures/practices/agents and between people and things? Secondly, and more specifically, how do we most appropriately conceptualise 'the economy' in capitalism, its temporalities and spatialities, its circuits and spaces and the links between them? By the 'economy' I refer to those processes and practices of production, distribution and consumption, which are simultaneously discursive and material constructions through which people seek to create wealth, prosperity and well-being and so construct economies; to circuits of production, circulation, realisation, appropriation and distribution of value. Value is *always* culturally constituted and defined. What counts as 'the economy' is, therefore, always cultural, constituted in places and distributed over space, linked by flows of values, monies, things and people that conjoin a diverse heterogeneity of people and things.

By 'capitalism' I refer to a particular mode of political-economic organisation defined by socially produced structural relations and parameters, which are always – and necessarily - realised in culturally and time/space specific forms. The extent to which the contemporary phase of capitalism represents a break from past trajectories of capitalist development continues to be a matter for debate. Although there is now more emphasis on continuity than on radical ruptures between – say – Fordism and post-Fordism, or other dichotomous binaries, there are still claims and counter-claims about the extent to which the economy is characterised by greater 'flexibility' or has become more 'cultural'.

The prime focus of this paper is the second introductory question, the conceptualisation of capitalist economies, but it is framed by the first. Capitalist economies are constituted via a complex mix of social relations, of understandings, representations and interpretations, and practices. Certainly the class relations of capital are decisive in defining such societies as capitalist but these are (re)produced in varying ways and in relation to non-capitalist class relations and non-class social relationships of varying sorts (such as those of age, ethnicity, gender, and territory). The social relationships of non-capitalist economies undoubtedly assume a great variety of forms, and occasional reference will be made to them. However, in order to allow some depth of analysis the focus will be on the economies of capitalisms and the social relations of capital that define and dominate them.

² The paucity of my remarks on the latter partly reflect limitations of space and certainly should not be seen suggesting that empirical research is somehow seen as less important. The value of theory lies in capacity to inform and guide empirical research rather than theory being a substitute for it.

2 Guiding principles: six axioms and some of their implications

In seeking to answer the two introductory questions, I begin from six axioms. First, there is a need for concepts at a variety of levels of abstraction. This theoretical variety is necessary in order to describe and account for the diverse individual and collective practices, with varying temporalities and spatialities, involved in processes of production, distribution, exchange and consumption and in the spatio-temporal flows of materials, knowledge, people and value (variously defined) that constitute 'economies'³. All social life occurs in irreversible flows of time and has a necessary spatiality. Secondly, however, the 'economy' must be conceptualised in such a way that these diverse practices are seen as necessarily inter-related and avoid fragmenting the economy into dis-located categories such as production and consumption, seeing these as at best unrelated and at worst hermetically sealed and self-contained. For a considerable period of time much social scientific analysis of the economy - whatever its theoretical stripe - tended to separate the analysis of consumption from that of production⁴ and explicitly or implicitly prioritised production over consumption. Consumption was simply seen as a necessary adjunct to production. Now this *is* the case in capitalist economies in one very precise sense. For both production and consumption – or, more accurately, exchange and sale – form moments in the totality of the production process and the point of sale is critical as this realises the surplus-value embodied in commodities and returns it to the monetary form. However, this is only a partial perspective on consumption. While services of necessity are (co)produced and consumed in the same time/space, the moment of sale of material commodities marks a shift in emphasis from their exchange to their use value characteristics, to what can be done with them post-sale in a variety of spaces of private and public consumption in homes and civil society. For the life of commodities after they have been sold has important instrumental, material and symbolic connotations and dimensions (ranging from the creation of waste, to the giving of gifts based on relations of family, friendship, love and reciprocity, to the creation of identities).

Thirdly knowledgeable and skilled subjects, motivated via various rationalities, undertake *all* forms of economic behaviour and practices⁵. Although people are certainly not the all-knowing one-dimensional rational automatons of neo-classical theory, what they do, how they do it, and where they do it, are the outcomes of purposeful behaviour, underpinned by knowledge and learning. People are not cultural dupes, not passive bearers of structures or habits, norms and routines. Conversely flows of people in the course of their actions

³ Gough (2003) takes me to task for not rigorously deducing such concepts from the value categories of capital (see Hudson, 2001). But to do so would be to seek a single totalising meta-narrative account that can explain anything and everything.

⁴ Economic geography was handicapped for some time by the legacies of 1960s spatial sciences approaches to location theory that sought to develop specific partial equilibrium theorisations of the space economies of exchange, sale and production – consumption as such was simply ignored.

⁵ The significance of knowledge and learning in the contemporary economy has recently been emphasised (Giddens, 1990). However, the key issue is the new ways that knowledge is important economically, not that knowledge has suddenly become economically important.

within the economy (and in other arenas, such as those of family and community) can become a mechanism and medium for flows of knowledge. Such flows can occur both in the form of embodied knowledge (often tacit) and that of the transmission of information in codified forms (written, spoken) via a variety of media (letter, telephone, fax, e-mail, for example).

Seen from this perspective, the economy is performed and (re)produced via meaningful and intentional human action but knowledge does not translate in any simple one-to-one relationship to behaviour. Knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Action is much more than simply a product of information and knowledge, shaped by diverse influences, from emotion to economic possibilities. Moreover, people and organisations have differential abilities to acquire and use knowledge in pursuit of their various projects (although this is not to equate such behaviour with generalised self-reflexivity and the continuous monitoring of individuals' life projects: see Giddens, 1991; Lash and Friedman, 1992). What people come to know and do depends in part upon their positionality in terms of class, ethnicity, gender and other dimensions of social differentiation and identity and the powers and resources available to them by virtue of their position within a given social structure, its organisations and institutions.

Furthermore, intention does not translate in any simple one-to-one relationship to outcome. Purposeful behaviour may have unavoidable and unintended as well as, or instead of, intended outcomes because people chronically act in circumstances in which they lack complete knowledge of the context, of other people and objects, and of the relationships between the people and objects on which they act. Miller (2002, 166) draws attention to "the degree to which the political economy around us is the result of the unintended consequences of intentional actions". There may be emergent properties because of the excess of practices, and the messy conjoining of people and things in heterogeneous networks and processes of ordering that produce emergence. Consequently, it is necessary to take seriously the unintended consequences of human action, at all levels from the individual to the formal organisations and institutions of the state (see Habermas, 1976; Offe, 1975). Complex change may be unrelated to agents actually seeking to produce change. They may simply recurrently perform the same actions but "through iteration *over time* they may generate unexpected, unpredictable and chaotic outcomes. Often the opposite of what human agents may be seeking to realise" (Urry, 2000b, 4). Nevertheless, given these qualifications about uncertainty, ignorance, and unintended outcomes, a concept of an economy that is not underpinned by intentional, purposeful behaviour, knowledge and learning is simply, literally, inconceivable. Economic practices are performed by knowledgeable, socially constituted subjects, although the outcomes of their actions may differ from those intended. However, the ways and forms in which knowledge and learning influence economic practice can and do vary over space and time.

The fourth axiom follows from the third: the economy is socially constructed, socially embedded, instituted in a Polyanian sense (with institutions ranging from the informality of habits to the formal institutions of government and the

state: for example, see Hodgson, 1988)⁶. These various institutions exhibit a degree of stability over the medium-to-long term, set within the *longue durée* of structural parameters and necessary relationships that define a particular mode of political-economic organisation (such as capitalism). As such, the economy can be thought of as a relatively stable *social* system of production, exchange and consumption⁷. However institutional stability is always conditional and contingent, as there are processes that seek to disrupt and break out of established institutional forms as well as processes that seek to reproduce them. Hollingsworth (2000, 624) emphasises that “... there is a great deal of path dependency to the way that institutions evolve”. Consequently institutional evolution is path dependent, as economic practices are performed in and create real, irreversible time. However, this is also a conditional dependence, for there are forces that seek to break path-dependency as well as those that reproduce it. Therefore it would be more accurate to describe economic and institutional development trajectories as path contingent, with periodic cyclical crises along a given path and the potential for secular changes from one path to another.

The fifth axiom is that behaviour (individual and collective) is both institutionalised and enabled and constrained by structures, understood as stable yet temporary (albeit very long-term) settlements of social relationships in particular ways (see Figure 1). Structural relations specify the boundary conditions and parameters that define a particular mode of political economic organisation as *that* mode. For example, the class structural relation between capital and labour is a defining feature of the capitalist mode of production – if this was not present, then some other mode of production would exist. However, this relationship can be constituted in varying instituted forms and this is central to the possibilities of creating many capitalisms and their historical geographies. Whatever the specific form, however, economic agents behave in instituted ways that are shaped by, and at the same time help reproduce, such structural relations. There is a definite relationship between practices in the short-term and in the long(er)-term. This is not to say that such relationships may not be challenged – they often are. However, such challenges are typically folded into and absorbed in ways that alter, but do not radically break and transform, the defining structural characteristics and boundary conditions defined by capitalist social relations. Nonetheless, there is theoretical space for structural change, a point of immense political significance.

The sixth axiom follows from the previous two. ‘The economy’ is constructed via social relations and practices that are not natural and typically are competitive. Consequently, they must be politically and socially (re)produced

⁶ Institutional approaches are discussed more fully in section 5.

⁷ Hollingsworth (2000, 614-5) suggests that a social system of production “is the way that a society’s institutions, its institutional arrangements and its institutional sectors are integrated into a social configuration. A society’s modes of economic governance and co-ordination and its institutional sectors develop according to a particular logic... institutions and institutional arrangements within sectors are historically rooted”. While a useful elaboration, this emphasis on ‘sectors’ suggests only a partial grasp of the institutions and processes through which the social relations of capital are (re)produced.

via regulatory and governance institutions that ensure the more or less smooth reproduction of economic life. These range from very informal governance institutions such as habits and routines in a variety of spheres, including those of civil society, community, family, and work, to the legal frameworks and formal regulatory mechanisms of the state. In short, there is a need to ensure the reproduction of the social relations of *capitalism* and not just those of *capital*, while acknowledging that the latter are both defining and dominant in capitalist economies and societies. However, while dominant, they are neither singular nor uncontested. Equally, there is a significant difference between the existence of rules and behavioural conformity with them. People may seek to break rather than obey rules, raising key questions as the circumstances in which they will do so (not least in terms of issues of predictability of behaviour). A distinction may be drawn between the formally regulated economy, the informal economy and the illegal economy (Figure 2). The formal economy consists of legal activities governed and regulated within the parameters of legislation. The informal economy consists of legal activities that are regulated by customary mechanisms and practices that fall outside the legal framework. Other activities are illegal but nonetheless form part of the economy (the economy of criminality, of the Mafia for example). However, the boundaries between formal, informal and illegal are fluid and vary over time/space.

The variety of institutions leads to complex spatialities of governance and regulation. These combine the diverse spaces and spatial scales (national, supra-national and sub-national) of state organisations and institutions within civil society. Systems of governance and regulation are now more multi-scalar (Brenner *et al.*, 2003) but national states retain a critical role within them (Sassen, 2003; Weiss, 1997; Whitley, 1999). While generally concerned with regulating the conditions that make markets possible, state activity can extend to supplementing or replacing market mechanisms in resource allocation, for example in the provision of welfare services or the production of key goods and materials. 'The economy' is chronically re-produced in situations of contested understandings, interests and practices because of the construction of governance and regulatory mechanisms that keep such potential disputes within 'acceptable' and 'workable' limits. However, such mechanisms themselves must be socially (re)produced, often via processes of conflict and struggle – and do not simply emerge automatically to meet the functional needs of capital. Thus the practices of government, governance and governmentality are of critical importance. Furthermore, within forms of capitalism that encompass formal political democracies these mechanisms must be generally regarded as acceptable and legitimate but in dictatorial capitalisms they may be more violently enforced as a result of state power. One way or another, however, modes of governance and regulation must be sufficiently held in place, or at least for a time.

The requirement for a degree of admittedly contingent institutional – and even more so – structural stability reflects the need for a degree of predictability in the outcomes of economic practices and transactions. Such stability is a necessary condition for a required degree of predictability in performing the economy. This requirement is complicated precisely because of the dynamic

character of the capitalist economy, the constant becoming of the economy. The economy is not something that simply is but always something that is *necessarily* in the processes of becoming (as, for example, companies constantly strive to produce new things, in new ways). The capitalist economy is performative, a practical order that is constantly in action (Thrift, 1999). Consequently, economic actors – workers, banks, manufacturing companies and so on – require a degree of predictability in order that the transactions and practices of the economy can be performed with some certainty as to outcome over varying time horizons. Companies need to be confident that customers will pay their bills on time, workers that they will receive their wages regularly, and governments that tax revenues will arrive at the due date. As such, there is an unavoidable tension between destabilising processes that would undermine predictability, stabilising processes that seek to assure it, and the necessarily dynamic character of capitalist production that complicates processes of governance and regulation and the smooth reproduction of capitalist economies. .

In summary, I assume an instituted and structurally situated economy produced by knowledgeable people behaving purposefully in pursuit of different, and often competitive, interests, which can be pursued with a sufficient degree of predictability of outcome, and which are contained within ‘acceptable – or at least tolerable - limits via a range of governance and regulatory mechanisms. There is an unavoidable tension between processes of institutionalisation, that seek to create a degree of stability and predictability, and the emergent outcomes of practices that seek to disturb this, either deliberately or inadvertently. I therefore also acknowledge that there is no single totalising meta-narrative that can explain everything about economies and their geographies but that nonetheless meta-narratives remain valuable – indeed are necessary – in seeking such explanations (cf. Massey, 1995, 303-304).

More specifically, I argue that there are, broadly speaking, two analytic strategies for understanding the economy and its geographies, with different but complementary inflections. The first approach can be defined as ‘(political) economic’, taking categories such as value, firms and markets as given, with these assumed to exist prior to their being observed and described from “on high” and to using them in analysing the economy. However, different types of economics conceptualise and represent these in different ways and I draw on Marxian and other heterodox traditions. The second can be thought of as ‘cultural (economic)’, with an epistemological focus on the discursive and practical construction and “making-up” of these categories, while rejecting ontological claims that the economy has become more cultural. It emphasises the ways in which the ‘economy’ is discursively as well as materially constructed, practised and performed, exploring the ways in which economic life is built up, made-up, and assembled, from a range of disparate but always intensely cultural elements.

3 A caveat about consumption and production

I want to enter a qualifications at this point and insist that any simple equation of production/economic and consumption/cultural, and of the primacy of the latter over the former, or vice versa, must be firmly rejected. While there is clearly a case for paying attention to consumption, there has been a tendency for the pendulum to swing too far, replacing one-sided accounts that were overly productionist in their emphasis with equally one-sided consumptionist accounts (Gregson, 1995), which, moreover, often conflate consumption with exchange and sale. This was especially so with “first wave” consumption studies. For example, Bauman (1992, 49) asserts that “in present day society consumer conduct (consumer freedom geared to the consumer market) moves steadily into the position of, simultaneously, the cognitive and moral focus of life, the integrative bond of society ... in other words, it moves into the self-same position which in the past – during the ‘modern’ phase of capitalist society – was occupied by work”. Baumann alludes here to the elision of (allegedly) post-productionist consumer society with post-modern society. Echoing this, Lash and Urry (1994, 296, emphasis in original) claim that “the consumption of goods and services becomes *the* structural basis of western societies. And via the global media this [pleasure seeking] principal comes to be extended world-wide”.

There are two kinds of lessons to be drawn from this, which are reflected in “second wave” consumption studies. First, politically, it clearly exemplifies the dangers of confusing fashions in academic thought based on very class and socially specific experiences of an affluent minority with substantive changes in the living conditions and lifestyles of a much broader spectrum of the world’s population. Even in the core territories of capitalism, at best only a fraction of the consumption activities of the vast majority of people could be said to be “pleasure seeking”. McRobbie (1997) criticises the political complacency of recent work on consumption that emphasises pleasure and desire precisely because it marginalizes issues of poverty and social exclusions in its urge to reclaim the “ordinary consumer” as a skilled and knowledgeable actor. For ordinary mundane consumption was (and indeed still is) neither hedonistic, nor materialistic nor individualistic but was above all the form by which “capitalism was negated and through which labour brought its products back into the creation of humanity” (Miller, 2002, 182). For the vast majority of people living beyond the affluent core territories, hedonistic consumption and pleasure seeking behaviour – let alone the attainment of pleasure – is a distant pursuit of the affluent minority, occasionally glimpsed on TV screens in a world characterised by perpetual hunger and malnutrition for the impoverished majority.

Secondly, theoretically, it illustrates the dangers of divorcing a concern with consumption from issues of production, both specifically in the context of capitalist economies but also more generally⁸. Understanding capitalist economies and their geographies requires a more nuanced and subtle stance in theorising relations between the moments of consumption and production within the totality of the economic process⁹. Equally in terms of epistemology,

⁸ One of the strengths of the commodity chain approach is that it seeks to connect consumption and production practices: see Smith *et al*, 2002.

⁹ If this smacks of meta-narrative, it is only one, not the only one, of relevance here.

there is, for example, a long history of rich ethnographic accounts of life in the workplace that seek to build an understanding of work and the social relations of the workplace in terms of the categories, understandings and practices of those engaged in the process (for instance, see Beynon, 1973¹⁰). Conversely, there are powerful political economies of consumption (for example, see Fine and Leopold, 1993; Miller, 1987). My argument is that such approaches are equally valid and should be seen as complementary. We need both to grasp the complexity of capitalist economies and their historical geographies, examining diverse practices of production, exchange and consumption from both political economy and cultural economy perspectives.

4 Cultural economy approaches to understanding the economy

There has recently been a considerable resurgence of emphasis on 'cultural' approaches to understanding economies and their geographies, although these are far from uniform, broadly falling into ontological and epistemological concepts of a "cultural economy (Ray and Sayer, 1999). For example, Lash and Urry (1994) argue that there has recently been a significant "culturalisation" of economic life, which is expressed in three ways. First, there has been a growth in the numbers of innovative companies producing cultural hardware and software. Secondly, "there is a growing aestheticization or 'fashioning' of seemingly banal products whereby these are marketed to consumers in terms of particular clusters of meanings, often linked to lifestyles" (p. 7). Thirdly, that there has been a growing "turn to culture" in the worlds of business and organisations, precisely because maintaining or enhancing competitiveness requires companies in which they conduct business and people to change the ways in which they behave within organisations.

However, the significance and validity of these epochal claims of 'increased culturalisation' are far from assured. In certain limited respects the economy may have become more cultural but to claim that the economy overall has become 'more cultural' is more problematic. The evidence in support of "the exemplary oppositions between a more 'use'-value centred past and a more 'sign-value-centred present" is simply "empirically insubstantial" (du Gay and Pryke, 2002, 7). Typically it is fragmentary, at times simply anecdotal. However, there is also an issue of adequate theorisation and conceptualisation of the links between 'economic' and 'cultural'. For, in practice, social actors cannot actually define a market or a competitor, "*except* through extensive forms of cultural knowledge" (Slater, 2002, 59, emphasis added). Producers cannot know what market they are in without extensive cultural calculation; and they cannot understand the cultural form of their product and its use outside of a context of market competition. Understanding culture and (local) cultural difference is vital in order successfully to produce and sell globally (Franklin *et al*, 2000, 146). In like fashion, the economic practices of advertising, evocatively described as the "magic system"

¹⁰ Though Beynon's work is cast more in the mould of political economy and economic sociology than cultural analysis.

(Williams, 1959), are intrinsically caught up with the cultural understanding of the role, functions and nature of advertisements (McFall, 2002, 161).

This draws attention to the way in which (to adopt a famous phrase from the cultural analysis of resources: Zimmerman, 1951): “products and markets are not, they become”. This is perhaps most sharply emphasised by the iconic commodity of twentieth century capitalism – the automobile – in which the cultural and economic are inextricably fused via the market segmentation and the symbolic meanings associated with automobiles and automobility (Sheller and Urry, 2000). Furthermore, in order to be(come) a particular kind of economic institution, a market must also be a certain kind of culturally defined domain, because it depends on the social categorisation of things as (dis)similar (Slater, 2002, 68)¹¹. The dependence of markets upon such social categorisation undermines propositions about the increasing “culturalisation of the economy” and the increasing, even complete, separation of the material and sign values of commodities.

Culturalism in its various forms reduces the product to its sign value and semiotic processes. As a result, the object becomes entirely dematerialised as a symbolic entity or sign, infinitely malleable and hence never stabilised as a socio-historical object; its definition can be entirely accounted for in terms of the manipulations of codes by skilled cultural actors. As such, the materiality of the object and the material economy and social structures through which it is elaborated as a meaningful entity are ignored. Consequently, there is also a tendency to reduce market structures and relations to semiotic ones. It is rather difficult to imagine how markets could exist over time, as they patently do, if products actually underwent the kind of semiotic reduction that culturalists assume. As Slater (2002, 73,) notes, “markets are in fact routinely institutionalised, and are even stabilised, around enduring definitions of products, whereas the semiotic reduction would assume that – as sign value – goods will be redefined at will”.

However, while the definition of a commodity, or of a thing, cannot be resolved by drifting off into the realm of floating signifiers, neither can its definition be simply and solidly anchored in given material properties. In contrast, the meanings of things, and things themselves, are stabilised or destabilised, negotiated or contested, within complex asymmetrical power relations and resource inequalities. This emphasises three things. First, the processes and interplay between the realms of the material, the symbolic and the social through which the meanings of commodities are created, fixed and re-worked. Secondly, the instituted social field within which multiple actors seek to intervene to establish the meaning of things. Thirdly, the political-economic structural relations within which both actors and social fields are located - although these can get lost in the emphasis on meanings.

Moreover, Law (2002) argues that culture is located and performed in human and non-human material practices, which extend beyond human beings, subjects and their meanings, and implicate technical, architectural,

¹¹ There are parallels here to the definition of an economic sector.

geographical and corporeal arrangements¹². As such, social production systems comprise a heterogeneity of people and things and links among and between them. That the social has an irreducible materiality is – or ought to be – old news: “Perhaps Marx told us this. Certainly Michel Foucault and a series of feminist and non-feminist partial successors have done so” (Law, 2002, 24)¹³. The reference to Marx is important, since one strand of the Marxian view of production centres on the labour process and transformation of elements of nature by people using artefacts and tools. In this regard, Law does no more – nor less - than re-state a proposition from Marxian analysis that conceptualises the economy as *always* a product of interactions between heterogeneous networks of people, nature (both animate subjects and inanimate objects) and things; of relationships between the social and the natural.

The conceptualisation of the economy therefore remains contested terrain, a terrain that is now more complex and in some ways more slippery in its analysis of relationships than it used to be. This raises some important issues about the relationships between ‘culture’ and ‘economy’. Miller (2002, 172-3) argues that it seems “quite absurd” to suggest that we live within some new self-conscious, self-reflexive economy. There are undoubtedly powerful marketing discourses in the contemporary economy, but “advertising and Hollywood were extraordinarily important” in the USA of half a century ago, and these made as much use as they could of the current psychological theories about how to create subjects (Williams, 1959). On the other hand, the economy was just as cultural “at the time when most academics saw themselves as Marxists”. It is undeniably true that a small, affluent minority live more self-reflexive (self-centred) lifestyles. It is also certainly an exaggeration to claim that there was a time when “most” academics were Marxists. Neither point, however, negates the force of Miller’s argument about the limitations of claims about the culturalisation of the economy.

In summary, positing a binary opposition between ‘economy’ and ‘culture’ is simply implausible and unhelpful. There is, however, considerable merit in an epistemological conception of cultural economy that envisages the ‘cultural’ as a ‘bottom up’ method of analysis¹⁴, complementary to a more top-down political economy. In contrast, suggestions that somehow the ‘economy’ has (ontologically) become more ‘cultural’ are misconceived and deeply problematic. Miller (2002, 172-3) is particularly scathing in his comments about the “culturalisation of the economy” thesis. He suggests that there

¹² The economy conceptualised as a heterogeneous networked association of people and things is a more general characteristic of Actant-Network Theorists such as Law and Latour (1987).

¹³ Thus capitalist production is always more than just the production of commodities by means of commodities (as neo-Ricardians such as Sraffa, 1960, argue). Furthermore classical political economy embraced relations between economy and environment as well as recognising the cultural constitution of ‘the economy’, as noted above.

¹⁴ Methodologically, this involves ethnographic and participant-observation approaches as well as interview-based approaches. However, in several respects such approaches are not new. Hermeneutic/interpretative and ethnographic approaches have a long history, both generally in the social sciences and specifically in seeking to understand economic forms and practices (albeit not in the framework of cultural economy: for example, see Beynon, 1973).

seems to be “a sleight of hand” through which a shift in academic emphasis is supposed to reflect a shift in the world, an economy that is more cultural than in earlier times¹⁵. In this, he echoes Hall (1991, 20), who cogently argues that “we suffer increasingly from a process of historical amnesia in which we think just because we are thinking about an idea it has only just started”. It is important to avoid such amnesia and to avoid conflating changes in the economy and changes in academic fashion. There is a need for eternal vigilance to guard against the constant danger of confusing new movements within thought (the (allegedly) new understanding that culture and economy cannot be theorised separately) from new empirical developments. The history of classical political economy (as evidenced, for example in the writings of Smith and Marx) prior to the marginalist revolution and the rise of neoclassical economics and its claims to universal economic laws was one that recognised the cultural constitution of ‘the economy’ (see Amin and Thrift, 2003). For “culture is everywhere and little has changed in this respect ... economically relevant activity has always been cultural” (Law, 2002, 21). “Is it the case”, Slater (2002, 78) asks rhetorically, “that culture is more central to the economic process than it was before? ... the answer, I think, is only in particular circumstances and instance but, in general, ‘no’”. Seeking to recover the ground conceded by the rise of neoclassicism in economics and acknowledge the long history of a cultural dimension within political economy is a very different matter to assuming that there has been a qualitative change involving the ‘culturalisation’ of the economy – the hard realities (if not quite iron laws) of commodity production and the production of surplus-value remain.

5 Political-economic approaches to understanding the economy

As with culture, the economic is a contested concept. There are several versions of ‘the economic’, based on differing theoretical presuppositions and forms and levels of abstraction (including neo-classical and mainstream orthodoxies, heterodoxies of various sorts including Marxian political economy and evolutionary and “old” and “radical” institutional approaches¹⁶). I reject the technicist conceptions of the economy and its geographies exemplified by neo-classical and mainstream orthodox economics, which persistently seek methodologically to fix economic categories as self-evident or natural (and which are central to the (allegedly) new ‘geographical economics’: for example see Krugman, 2000; Glaeser, 2000)¹⁷. Indeed, Slater (2002, 72)

¹⁵ Law (2002) makes the same point about relationships between change in the world that social scientists analyse and changes in style and fashion of analysis that they deploy.

¹⁶ The distinction between “radical”, “old” and “new” institutional analysis is important. “New” institutionalism is close to the mainstream orthodoxies (Williamson, 1975). “Old” institutionalism emphasises the institutional and social embeddedness of “the economy” (as expressed in the work of Common, Polanyi, or Veblen: see Hodgson, 1994). Radical institutionalism emphasises issues such as asymmetrical power relations in shaping economic life (Dugger, 1989; 2000).

¹⁷ Thrift (1999, 59) notes the irrelevance of most formal economic – that is mainstream orthodox – theory to business practices. Indeed, these seem more in tune – albeit only implicitly - with heterodox theories which emphasise the need to extract surplus-value from workers, to ensure the creation of monopoly rents via product and organisational innovation,

argues more generally that within economic analysis “needs and goods appear as a natural and self-evident”. In more critical theory, the use value/exchange value distinction within the commodity form “has generally functioned as a proxy for the distinction for a ‘natural metabolism’ between man and nature, and the warped social form taken by need and things within capitalist market relations”. While Slater’s comments regarding neo-classical and mainstream orthodoxies are reasonable, his view of critical theory reveals a partial and warped understanding of Marxian political economy. For ‘critical’ heterodox positions embrace more than Marxism while the notion of some ‘unwarped’ natural form is difficult to reconcile with *any* notion of ‘the economy’ as socially constituted and embedded.

Recognising the heterogeneity of heterodox economics, I argue that a political economy approach needs to combine the differing but complementary levels of abstraction of various heterodox positions – Marxian, institutional and evolutionary. This multiple approach is needed in order to begin to grasp the complexity of ‘the economy’ as constituted by labour processes, process of material transformation and processes of value creation and flow in specific time/space contexts¹⁸. Marxian analyses allow a specification of the structural features common to all capitalist economies that define them as capitalist. However, such structures do not exist independently of human practice; quite the contrary. They are both a condition for and an expression and a result of such practices and are always contingently reproduced. Practices may give rise to emergent effects that challenge the reproduction of these structures, although there are powerful social forces and institutions that seek to assure their continuation. In short, there is a permanent tension between processes that seek to destabilise these structural relations and those that seek to reproduce them, that is generally – but not inevitably – resolved in favour of the latter. This may involve folding disruptive processes into new institutional forms of capitalism while leaving the defining class structural relations unchanged.

Indeed, the distinction within Marxian political economy between modes of production and social formations, recognises that capitalism was – and is – constituted in variable ways. This insight has been considerably developed within other strands of heterodox political economy, in particular within evolutionary and institutional economics and sociology. Institutional approaches emphasise the ways in which these economies are constituted and embedded in specific cultural and time/space contexts. Evolutionary approaches foreground the path dependent character of development. At its most abstract level, the ‘economy’ in capitalism is certainly dominated, indeed defined, by the social relations of capital – and powerful analytic tools are needed to theorise these. At this level, Marxian political economy and its

and so on. Equally many trades’ union practices have been shaped more by Marxian political economy than by mainstream orthodoxies. Much public sector economic policy is guided by mainstream theoretical orthodoxies, which helps account for the chronic disjunction between policy intentions and outcomes, although there is an increasing influence of various heterodox strands of thought of local and regional economic development policy.

¹⁸ In turn, methodologically, it requires a variety of forms of evidence (quantitative and qualitative) relating to concepts such as firms, markets, or labour productivity.

value-theoretic account of the social relations and structures of capital provides powerful conceptual tools to understand accumulation by, through and as commodity production and surplus-value production. However, this is a highly abstract approach and so there it is necessary to develop less (or differently) abstract concepts to understand how capitalist production and the (re)production of capital are secured. This requires other theoretical constructs to capture the ways in which capitalism is instituted in specific time/space contexts, discursively and materially formed and concretised in and through specific informal and formal institutions. As such, it necessarily includes theorising the state, regulation and governance within capitalism and also links between the formal and informal sectors of capitalist economies¹⁹. Put another way, it requires understanding how practices, institutions and structures inter-relate in the reproduction of capital (understood as a social relationship).

This in turn, however, requires acknowledging that the commodity form within capitalism is a slippery one, temporally and spatially (Appadurai, 1986), and that the social structural relations of capital intersect with those of other social structures (such as ethnicity or gender) in varying ways. While there may be co-evolution of structures, this is a variable and contingent process. Massey (1995, 303-4) recognises that there are broad social structural relations - of class, gender and ethnicity, for example - which have determinate though non-deterministic effects. Recognition of such broad structures "is not the same as the commitment to, or the adoption of, a metanarrative view of history. None of the structures ... need to be assumed to have any inexorability in their unfolding ... outcomes are always uncertain, history and geography have to be made". These effects are determinate rather than deterministic precisely because of the multiplicity of structures, the conjunctural specificities of which combination of structures intersect and interact in a given time/space (which may also activate specific 'local' contingencies)²⁰, and the emergent properties of practices.

The process of commodification brings about, albeit unevenly, the extension and penetration of capitalist mechanisms and forms into aspects of the world and life-world from which they were previously absent. However, these processes result in uncertainty about the fate of commodities once they have been sold. The purchase of commodities depends (inter alia) upon the meanings that consumers attach to them. Consumption is one source of meaning and identity, both for those purchasing the commodity and those consuming it (for example, the recipient of a gift). There are claims that we are what we eat, what we wear and so on and, beyond those, that the body itself has become an accumulation strategy, with bodies worked on in terms of physical fitness, health clubs and plastic surgery to reshape various parts of human anatomies in socially sanctioned ways. Goods acquire meaning and value, becoming "culturally drenched" and so taking on "identity values", expressed in rituals around possession and the giving of gifts, for example

¹⁹ For comparable arguments, see McFall (2002)

²⁰ Miller (2002, 166) likewise emphasises the degree to which the political economy around us is the result of "structural conjunctions", as different structures interact in specific time/space conjunctures.

(Featherstone, 1991). However, such identity values are subject to change and re-negotiation. Not least this is because commodities are manufactured with their own pre-planned trajectories, with built-in obsolescence within a product life cycle. As commodities reach the end of their socially useful lives to their original purchasers, they may be 'sold on', both formally and informally in a variety of spaces (such as street markets and car boot sales). In this process, the meanings attached to commodities by their original purchasers are typically re-worked (as, often, are the things themselves) so that there are recursive circuits of things and meanings rather than simply a linear paths or a single circuit of meaning.

However, commodity production and consumption are also often complex processes of material transformations. The resultant 'environmental footprint' of these activities emphasises the critical grounding of 'economies' in nature. Elements of 'first nature' become increasingly commodified while a 'second nature' is also increasingly produced from within the social relations of capital. There is a significant difference between the appropriation of an 'external' first nature into capitalist social relations and producing a second nature within those relations. With recent developments in biotechnologies even life itself has become capitalised and produced as part of second nature (Franklin *et al*, 2000).

Finally, notwithstanding the increasing production of nature as second nature, within capitalist economies there remain 'economic activities' that are not under the direct sway of capitalist relations of production, both within and outside the spaces of capitalism (Figure 2). This raises questions as to how capitalist and non-capitalist economies relate to one another and about strategies of 'accumulation by dispossession' – that is, (forcibly) taking things/people not produced as commodities and commodifying them (Harvey, 2002,) ²¹. Not least, *the* key requirement of any form of capitalist production – the availability of labour-power – requires that people produced in a non-commodity form become commodified as labour-power, selling their capacity to work on the labour market in exchange for a wage. This requires understanding of the processes whereby people are reproduced as sentient, thinking human beings, conscious agents with their own agendas pathways and plans – that is, *not* as commodities – and the circumstances in which and the processes through which they become commodified as labour-power²².

The key point in terms of conceptualising 'the economy', however, is that recognising the existence of non-capitalist social relations within capitalist economies and non-capitalist economies alongside capitalist ones requires considering different concepts and theories of value and other economic categories to those appropriate to the mainstream, formal capitalist economy. It requires consideration of different processes of valuation, in which value is not defined as socially-necessary labour time but in terms of some other metric, perhaps in a more multi-dimensional way that reflects a broader range

²¹ Historically, within radical political economy this was reflected in literatures on the articulation of modes of production (for example see Amin, 1977).

²² There are circumstances in which slavery and indentured labour become mechanisms to assure the supply of labour-power outside the normal sphere of market transactions.

of cultural and social concerns²³. This raises the issue of how best to understand processes of production and consumption in these 'alternative' economies and their circuits, flows and spaces, both in themselves and in their (lack of) relationships to the mainstream²⁴. This raises questions of political character of political economy and leads into a normative question of future alternatives, of 'sustainable economies' and their spaces.

6 Cultural economy and political economy: complementary not alternative approaches

While some see cultural economy as an alternative to political economy approaches, I prefer to see them as complementary perspectives: understanding geographies of economies necessarily needs to embrace both. This does no more than recover a position that was central to classical political economy but that was generally (there were exceptions) denied for many decades following the ascendancy of neoclassical orthodoxy (and that continues to be denied within the discipline of mainstream economics). Nonetheless, such recovery is vital to a more nuanced understanding of economies and their geographies. Thus the objects of analysis can be both taken 'as given' and can be problematised in terms of their discursive and material constitution. For example, consider the central concept of "market". A market "is physically a place, a set of socio-technologies, and a set of practices. ... Socially it is also a set of rules" (Law, 2002, 24). In contrast, du Gay and Pryke (2002, 2) suggest that "the turn to culture" reversed the perception that markets exists prior to and hence independently of descriptions of them. A cultural approach indicates the ways in which objects are constituted through the discourses used to describe and to act upon them. As such, economic discourses format and frame markets and economic and organisational relations, "'making them up' rather than simply observing and describing them from a God's-eye vantage point". This has critical analytical implications since it suggests that "economic discourse is a form of representational and technological (that is, cultural) practice that constitutes the spaces within which economic action is formatted and framed". Put slightly differently, the discursive space of the economic decisively shapes the practical spaces of the economy; and vice versa. Discursive and practical spaces are co-determining, co-evolutionary.

As such, economic categories (for instance firms, or markets) need to be analysed in complementary ways that acknowledge the processes through which commodities are produced and the meanings of commodities created, fixed and re-worked and the political-economic structural relations in which people are unavoidably located. What is required is a culturally sensitive political economy that begins from the assumption that the economy is -

²³ There is a connection here between concepts of space (defined in terms of capital's one-dimensional interest in locations as a source of profit) and place (reflecting people's multi-dimensional attachments to a location via relations of family, friendship and community): see Hudson, 2001, Chapter 8.

²⁴ For example conceptualising the relationship between the mainstream formal economy and the social economy or 'Third Sector' is discussed in Amin *et al* (2002).

necessarily – always cultural and a politically sensitive cultural economy that is alert to the power geometries and dynamics of political economy. These provide complementary approaches, viewing the economy from different analytic windows rather than an ‘either/or’ ontological and epistemological choice. Indeed these approaches in some respects interpellate one another rather than being discrete and self-contained. As such, the space currently occupied by culture-economy divisions and reductions could be at least partially reconstructed by treating concepts such as competition, markets, products and firms as *both* lived realities *and* as formal categories (cf. Slater, 2002, 76). Indeed, it could reasonably be argued that Marxian political economy has always contained strands of both approaches (Anderson, 1984).

7 Re-considering the issues

Given the above, I now want further to explore in a preliminary way two sets of inter-related issues. First, the conceptualisation of relations between agents, practices, representations and structures and their varying temporalities (Figure 1), using the notion of practice as what people do in the economy as a way of better grasping relationships between agency and structure by emphasising doing rather than just thinking, the material and affective as well as the cognitive²⁵. Law (2002, 21-3) defines practices as “materially heterogeneous relations” that “carry out and enact complex interferences between orders or discourses”. As such, economic practices in their various and multiple specificities interfere in different and specific performances with other, alternative strategies and styles. Moreover this interference and multiplicity produce an “irreducible excess”, which is necessary to the survival of discourses and performances grounded in them. Secondly, there is the issue of the conceptualisation of relations between spaces, flows and circuits, addressing the question of how to explain which parts of circuits are ‘fixed’ in which spaces for a given period of time. Three points can be made briefly in relation to this second question. First, spaces must be understood relationally, as socially constructed. Secondly, economic process must be conceptualised in terms of a complex circuitry with a multiplicity of linkages and feedback loops rather than just ‘simple’ circuits or, even worse, linear flows²⁶ (though for convenience the terminology of ‘circuits’ is used below: see Jackson, 2002, for a similar argument)²⁷. Thirdly, the economy must be conceptualised as a complex system, *a fortiori* given recognition that it involves material transformations and co-evolution between natural and social systems.

There are two important implications of ‘complexity’ in this context. First, economic practices may have unintended as well as, or instead of, intended consequences, because people chronically act in circumstances of partial

²⁵ Deploying practice in this way may well be anathema to non-representational theorists.

²⁶ Such as commodity chains (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994) or production seen as a linear series of materials transformations (Jackson, 1996).

²⁷ “My argument involves a move from linear commodity chains to more complex circuits and networks as a way of subverting dualistic thinking and unsettling the kind of linear logic that sees consumption at one end of a chain that begins with consumption” (Jackson, 2002, 5).

knowledge. Secondly, 'complexity' implies emergent properties that *may* lead to a change between developmental trajectories rather than simply path dependent development along an existing trajectory. There is a danger that concepts of path dependency (especially if grounded in biological analogy) can lead to an underestimation of the role of agency and reduce actors to "cultural dupes" (Jessop, 2001). People thus cease to be knowledgeable actors and come to be regarded as the passive bearers of habits, norms and routines (much as structuralist readings of Marx reduced them to passive bearers of structures). As a result, the concept of path contingency better expresses the possibilities of moving between as well as along developmental paths (Hardy, 2002). Actions and practices and systemic interactions may create emergent properties that alter, incrementally or radically, the direction of developmental trajectories. Consequently, evolutionary paths may be far from straightforward. As such, recognition of complexity and emergent properties can aid understanding of a shift from a simple evolutionary perspective of change along a given trajectory to evolution understood as a change from one trajectory to another²⁸.

There has been a lively - at times, heated - debate as to the conceptualisation of contemporary economy and society in terms of circuits, flows or spaces, and of the relations between them. Some argue that 'fixities' no longer matter, or at least matter less, in a world of flows and (hyper)mobilities (Castells, 1996; Urry, 2000a). There is undeniably evidence of greater mobility, albeit unevenly, across a wide range of activities and spatial scales²⁹. But for social life to be possible, for the economy to be performable, fluid socio-spatial relations and flows require a degree of permanence, of fixity of form and identity- whether in terms of the boundaries of the firm, of national states, or of local places.

However, there is also a dialectic of spaces and flows and circuits, centred on the *necessary* inter-relations of mobilities and fixities, of spaces, circuits and flows. Circuits and flows require spaces in which their various 'stages/phases' can be performed and practised, while stretching social relations to create spaces of different sorts, fixing capital in specific time/space forms and ensembles (Hudson, 2001, Chapter 8). Spaces are both discursive and material. Material spaces are constituted as built environmental forms, a product of materialised human labour. Discursive spaces enable meanings to be both contested and established, permissible forms of action to be defined and sanctioned, and inadmissible behaviour to be disciplined. Recognising that spaces are discursively as well as materially constructed implies that this process does not simply describe the economy. It is also in part constitutive of it, defining the economy as an object of analysis, constructing the spaces of meaning and the meaning of the spaces in which the economy is enacted and

²⁸ It is an open question as to whether emergent properties lead to changes within the parameters of capitalist social relations or to a shift onto alternative non-capitalist paths. This also raises key political questions about 'steering' changes along or between developmental trajectories (Hudson, 2001, Chapter 9).

²⁹ Damette introduced the concept of hyper-mobility of capital in 1974. Thus the notion that the capitalist economy has suddenly 'speeded up' in the last decade or so requires some careful re-consideration.

performed. These spaces of meaning then become guides to social and individual action. The same point can be made about concepts of circuits and flows, which are also constitutive rather than simply descriptive. As such, spaces, flows and circuits are socially constructed, temporarily stabilised in time/space by the social glue of norms and rules, and both enable and constrain different forms of behaviour.

Spaces, flows and circuits are thus both the medium and products of practices (over varying time scales), based on human understandings and knowledges. Moreover, flows, circuits and practices are also instituted, situated in specific time/space contexts. As such, they are socially constructed and shaped (but not mechanistically determined) by prevailing rules, norms, expectations, and habits and by dominant power relations. As Law (2002, 24) remarks of factories, markets, offices and other spaces of the economy, each is “a set of socio-technologies and a set of practices. But socially it is also a set of rules”. Such spaces are thus simultaneously materially constructed, a fixation of value in built form, a product of and an arena for practices, defined and regulated by socially sanctioned rules which prescribe or proscribe particular forms of behaviour. In this sense there are structural limitations on action and understanding but, reciprocally, these limitations are a product of human action, beliefs and values: structures are both constraining and enabling. Structural constraints are most powerful when they are hegemonic, taking effect because they have become taken-for-granted, unquestioned determinants of everyday behaviour (Gramsci, 1971). Everyday routine then – even if unintentionally and unconsciously – reproduces these structural relations. Not least this is because of the existence of “enabling myths” (Dugger, 2001), deeply embedded in the beliefs and meanings in which such routine is grounded, which have the effect of “naturalising” the social and reproducing the structural. However, as structures do not exist independently of human action and understanding but are always immanent, contingently reproduced, they are in principle changeable. This is a key theoretical point and – potentially – one of immense political importance.

Bourdieu catches this sense of hegemony via his concept of habitus. Habitus emphasises the doxic (taken-for-granted, unthinking) elements of action, social classification and practical consciousness. He (1977, 72) argues that the structure of a particular constitutive environment produces “habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, as structured structures, that is, as principles of the generation of practices and representations which can be objectively regulated and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules”. They are “objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a consensus aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operation necessary to attain them, and being all this collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating actor of the conductor”. Bourdieu (1981, 309) later makes a critical point in insisting that habitus is “an analytic construct, a system of ‘regulated improvisation’, or generative rules that represents the (cognitive, affective and evaluative) internalisation by actors of past experience on the basis of shared typifications of social categories, experienced phenomenally as ‘people like us’” that varies by and is differentiated between social groups. Crucially, however, “because of

common histories, members of each 'class fraction' share similar habitus, creating regularities of thought, aspirations, dispositions, patterns of action that are linked to the position that persons occupy in the social structure they continually reproduce". While Bourdieu refers specifically to 'class fractions', commonality of experience and identity could as well be based on 'people like us' defined via other social attributes, such as ethnicity, gender or place of residence. Furthermore, historical processes of class formation will reflect the intersection of structures of class relations with those of other social structures (cf. Massey, 1995, 301-5).

8 Taking stock

We need to take what people do and their reasons for doing it, their actions and performances, seriously if we are to understand how structures are (un)intentionally (re)produced and constitute 'guides to action', informing social agents of appropriate ways of 'going on'. For example capitalists and workers behave in particular ways because they understand the world in terms of a specific class structural representation of capital:labour relations. Nationalists and regionalists behave in particular ways because of their understanding of the world as principally organised around shared territorial interests and identities. Moreover, such behaviour may well be paradoxical precisely because social actors behave in circumstances beyond their control. For example, radical trades unionists go to work, even though they understand the capitalist labour process as exploitative, since on a quotidian basis they and their families need to eat, to have a place to live and so on.

The 'economy' is thus instituted, based on shared understandings, discursively established, regarding 'proper' behaviour and conduct by the owners and managers of capital and the vast variety of workers in factories, offices, shops, consumers and so on. But these shared understandings and resultant practices/performances are structured by understandings of what capitalist production *necessarily* requires (a sufficient mass and rate of profit) and of how this can be produced. As such, they are shaped by and simultaneously help reproduce structural constraints and the materiality of the economy. Thus, capitalist business is based in a material culture of relations between people and things that ranges from the vast number of intermediaries required to produce trade, through the wide range of means of recording and summarising business, to the different arrangements of buildings (spaces of work) that discipline workers' bodies. These devices and arrangements "are not an aid to capitalism; they are a fundamental part of what capitalism is" " (Thrift, 1999, 59). Of course, not least this is the case because a large part of these 'aids' is produced as commodities³⁰.

The recognition of different arrangements of buildings as spaces of production that discipline workers' bodies touches on an important aspect of the spaces of economies and the ways in which these are both a medium for and product

³⁰ There are strong echoes here of Sraffa's (1960) neo-Ricardian account of capitalist production as the production of commodities by means of commodities.

of human behaviour. More generally, economic spaces, circuits and flows both help produce and are (re)produced by performance. They both constrain and enable different forms of economic practice. In this way consumers and producers of these spaces both produce and consume their own (formally economic) citizenship. Those who cannot produce or consume in this way cease to be legitimate citizens. Spaces and practices are “binding agents” in terms of how economies are performed and subject positions created and inflected (Thrift, 2000); the same point can be made about circuits and flows. Alternatively, and simultaneously, they are agents of social exclusion for those denied access to them.

However, relationships between agency, practice and structure are even more complicated because (as the Foucauldian comment about disciplining workers’ bodies hints) there are typically contested and competing understandings of what is and what is possible in terms of action and change. For example, there is a struggle within workplaces between managers and workers, a contest to define and dominate the ‘frontier of control’ (Beynon, 1973). Equally, there are typically competitive struggles between capitalists for markets and profits and among groups of workers seeking to promote their interests in competition with other groups of workers (Herod, 2001; Hudson, 2001). All must also be disciplined to accept the ‘rules of the game’ of the commodity producing market economy in conducting these struggles, though these rules vary through time/space. As a result, there is a complicated and multi-dimensional struggle for domination between competing views of the world and material interests. Consequently, the reproduction of structural constraints is a product of contested processes, unless, of course, one particular view becomes generally if not universally accepted as hegemonic.

9 Conclusions

My focus in this paper has been on conceptualising capitalist economies and the spaces, circuits and flows through which they are constituted, especially in capitalism’s late modern phase. There are claims that this represents a radical break with earlier phases, and that in particular it is marked by an enhanced ‘culturalisation’ of the economy. This is an argument that I broadly reject, not least as it conflates changes in intellectual fashion and perspective with alleged changes in the economy. Practices of production, exchange and consumption, linked to flows of capital, commodities, information and people, are central to the constitution of the spaces of capitalist economies and are neither more nor less cultural than they previously have been (although they may be differently cultural) and neither more nor less material (Lee, 2002). As such, spaces of consumption, exchange and production are linked via a complex circuitry of flows and at the same time constitute the material and discursive spaces through which these flows can and must occur. Circuits, flows and spaces exist in relations of mutual determination, socially produced in historically-geographically-variable ways. As Dicken and Yeung (1999, 125) put it, “we need to recognise the organisation and geographical diversity of internationalising, regionalising and globalising processes and forms, ... together with the multiple scales at which they are enacted”. A corollary of

recognising this diversity is a need for a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches in order to comprehend the economy: for example, political economic and cultural economic approaches.

Recognition of the co-existence of spaces of production, exchange and consumption also points to the ways in which the same individual may fulfil different roles and niches within capitalist economies at different time/spaces. People have different motives and rationalities, depending upon their positions in the economy: for example, as capitalists, managers of capital, workers or consumers. They may also participate simultaneously in the social relations of the economy in different ways in the same time/space – for example as consumer, producer and indirect owner of capital via their participation in company pension schemes. Because of this multiplicity of positions in the social relations of the economy, people develop multiple understandings of capitalist economies and their implications, depending upon their own variable positionality, not just in terms of class relations within capitalism but also in terms of ethnicity, gender, age and so on. This has manifold implications for the creation of (multiple) identities within the circuits and spaces of economies. Once again, the cultural and economic fold into one another, with profound implications for political action.

Finally, I have claimed in this paper that cultural economy and political economy both can and should be regarded as complementary perspectives. It is the case, however, that there is comparatively little evidence that those practising economic geography operate in this way³¹. There seems to be a mild-to-strong tension on both sides, and quite a bit of mutual suspicion. Specifically in terms of research priorities, there is precious little agreement. Culturalists tend to see political-economic geographers' choices of research foci as unnecessarily centred on the formal economy/production/markets (and indeed certain industries) while political-economists often see culturalists' research choices to be almost wilfully trivial (for example car boot sales, or LETS, which are certainly conceptually intriguing but hardly pivotal to contemporary capitalism). Seen in this sense, one group seeks to centre the economy, the other to decentre it. However, another way of approaching the issue is to recognise that what is at stake here is precisely what *is* defined as and taken to be "the economy", and the ways on which different social relations constitutive of different versions of economies are thought of both in everyday practices of production, exchange and consumption and in social scientific practices that seek to make theoretical sense of them both from the "bottom up" and from the "top down". Carrying out such research certainly requires theoretical sophistication and recognition of the need for different types of theory but, in addition, empirical research of a variety of sorts that is grounded in these different theorisations and their conceptions of valid evidence and knowledge. So, for example, more thoroughly understanding the geographies of the automobile industry would entail political economic analysis of the production (both as a labour process and as a process of material transformation) and consumption of vehicles but also cultural

³¹ This point was made forcibly, and fairly, by one of the referees' of the paper. Much of this final paragraph is directly derived from his/her comments, a debt that I am happy to acknowledge.

analyses of work on the production line and of the automobile as one of the iconic commodities of consumption in modern capitalism (exploring its relations to advertising and the production of meanings), and including work on markets for second hand, vintage and “retro” cars and extending the use of the car boot itself as a space of sale for a range of other “re-cycled” commodities. Such work, grounded in different conceptions of theory and synthesising the results of different sorts of research and evidence, will certainly not be easy, but is necessary if there is to be further progress in economic geography.

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Figure 1 Temporalities of practices, institutions and structures

La vie quotidien

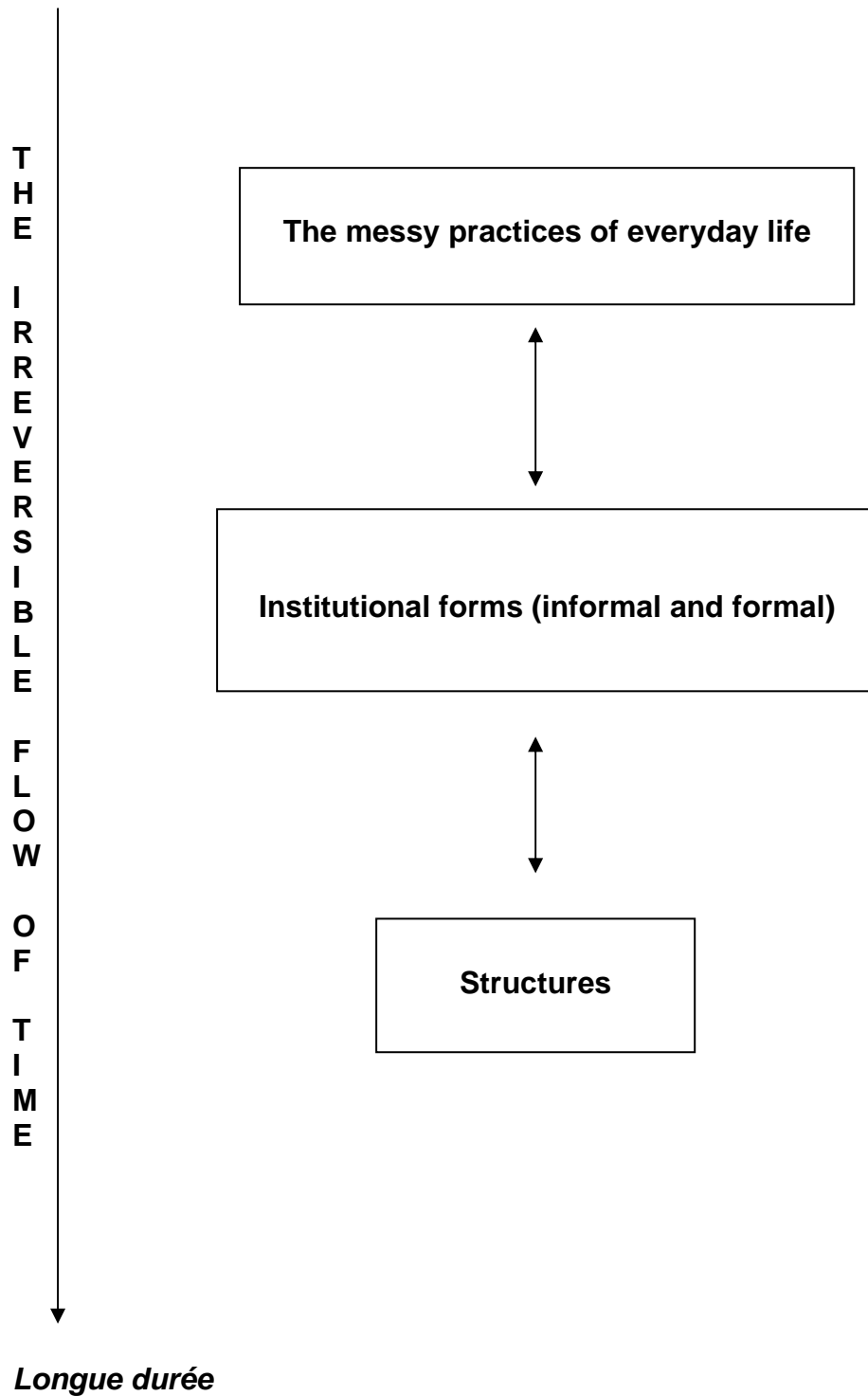


Figure 2 Conceptualising the complex relations of economies and their spaces in capitalism

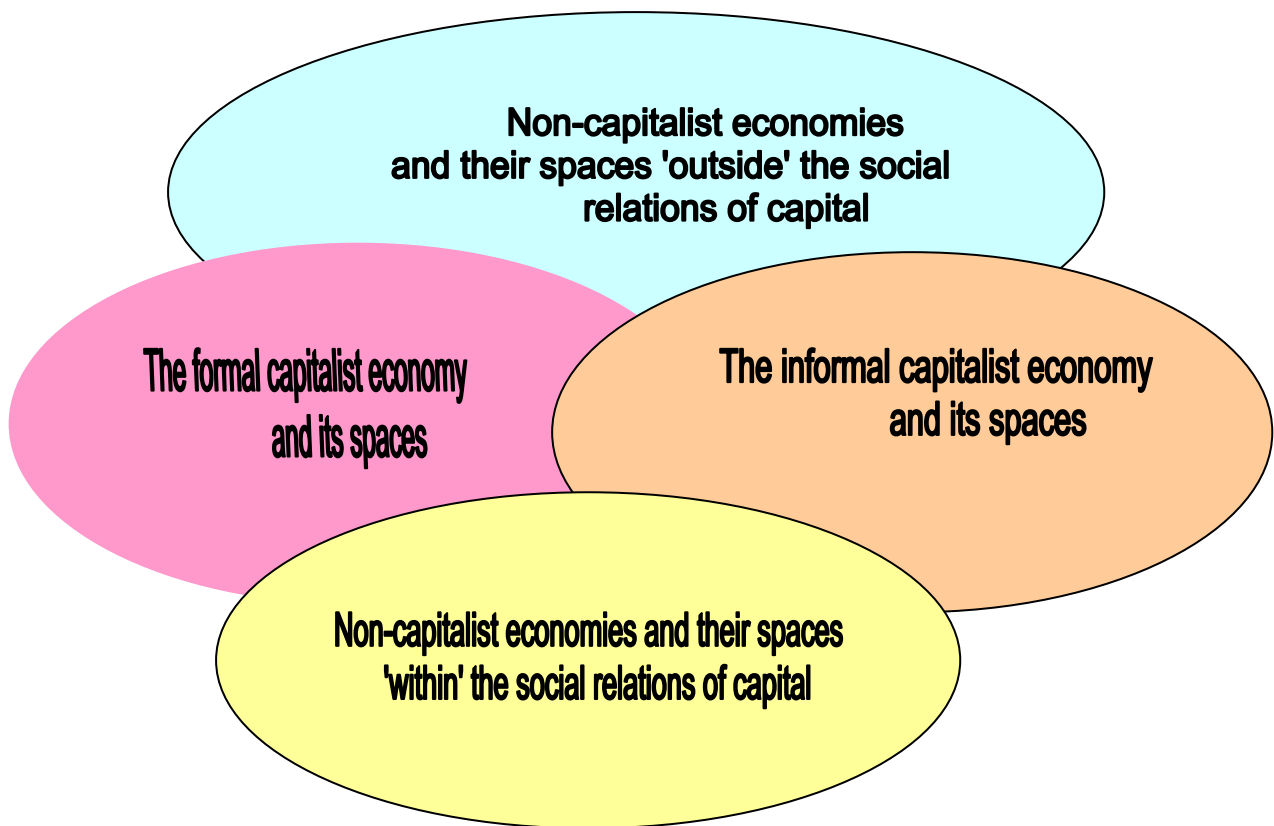


FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1 Temporalities of practices, institutions and structures

Figure 2 Conceptualising the complex relations of economies and their spaces in capitalism